

MANAGING BISON

Stockmen leery of Schweitzer proposal Governor says a new approach is needed to protect state

By **SCOTT McMILLION** Chronicle Staff Writer

MILES CITY — Gov. Brian Schweitzer took his new bison management ideas into the lion's den Thursday.

He got a pretty snarly reception at the summer meeting of the Montana Stockgrowers Association, a conservative, largely Republican group that has advocated stricter controls on bison that wander out of Yellowstone National Park.

Schweitzer, a Democrat, said the opposition is partly political.

For some members of the group, "Whatever I'm for, they're against," he said after the presentation.

Schweitzer maintains the current bison management plan isn't working. In the six years it's been in place, it's sucked up millions in tax dollars and increased the risk of brucellosis passing to cattle because the park's bison herd roughly doubled, thereby doubling the number of potentially infected animals.

"Unless we do something different, we're going to be in the same boat as Wyoming and Idaho," he said, referring to states that have already lost their brucellosis-free status.

Only a few hundred cattle spend time in the Gardiner and West Yellowstone areas, but all 2 million cattle in the state would lose brucellosis-free status if even two animals become infected with the disease, according to federal rules.

The current plan relies on repeatedly hazing bison back into the park or rounding them up and shipping them to slaughter.

Schweitzer has proposed buying out the grazing rights on private land in the "mixing zones" around Gardiner and West Yellowstone, or else setting up a quarantine area for cattle in those areas, with rigorous testing for disease.

That way, the rest of the state's herds would be protected, he said.

He also would enlarge the state's new bison hunt, with an increasing kill of females, to help reduce the herd's size.

If the bison wander too far, they could be killed legally by any Montana resident.

"When I say a drop-dead zone, I mean a drop-dead zone," he said.

"It would be easier for me politically to do nothing," he said. "I could let the bison herd keep growing like the last three administrations did."

During a question-and-answer session, a couple people thanked Schweitzer for meeting with them.

"The lack of conversation has caused a lot of difficulty," one man said.

But most questioners were dubious.

John Hagenbarth, a Dillon rancher active in public lands issues, urged Schweitzer to look at legal ways to force the federal government to "step up to the plate" and deal with Yellowstone bison.

"Force the federal government to control (bison) numbers and clean up the disease," he said.

He said the environmentalist community's agenda is to remove all cattle from the greater Yellowstone area, a belief echoed by Rep. Diane Rice, R-Harrison.

She said if any kind of buffer zone is established, "by (environmentalists') intent, it's supposed to grow."

Schweitzer said Republicans have been running the federal government for five years and haven't improved the situation.

Schweitzer met earlier this week with officials of the Church Universal and Triumphant, which runs about 150 cows a few miles north of Yellowstone. That meeting was more cordial, and church officials said they were amenable to working out a plan.

But Schweitzer accused the stockgrowers of urging CUT not to work with him.

Stockgrowers president Bill Donald said that was a misinterpretation of his conversations with CUT.

The impetus for Schweitzer's appearance here was a May 23 memo from the Western States Livestock Health Association, which includes the state veterinarians of 19 states.

That memo said that if "commingling" of possibly infected elk and bison with cattle cannot be avoided, exposed cattle herds should be quarantined.

Schweitzer maintained that memo indicates increasing concern in other states, though State Veterinarian Tom Linfield said the veterinary association is comfortable with Montana's actions so far.

Schweitzer urged members of the stockgrowers to come to him with ideas.

If the stockgrowers won't work with him, he said, "we'll have to work with somebody who's willing to work with us."